

Building A Character

PEABODY

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Building a Character.

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PREFACE.

It will be seen that the material of this volume was prepared for a college occasion. But, believing that the truths which it encourages, and the counsels which it gives, are such as may deserve the heed of young men in any condition of life whatever, the author is induced to offer it to a larger public, with the earnest hope that it may be of service in the building of characters that shall stand the test of earthly trial and be not unfit for heaven.

A. P. PEABODY.

HARVARD COLLEGE.

BUILDING A CHARACTER.

I.

STRENGTH AND BEAUTY.

"Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary."—Psalms xcvi. 6.

"The temple of God is holy, which temple ye are."—I. Corinthians iii. 17.



CHARACTER-building, for you who have the active work of life largely before you, is your most imminent duty, and may be your most blessed privilege; and character-building ought to be temple-building,—the framing and perfecting of a sanctuary for the indwelling God,—a sanctuary in whose firm foundation, massive walls, fair proportions, and rich

adornings there should be blended strength and beauty.

At your age, indeed, we are wont to say that character is already formed, and so it is, after a fashion, yet not so consolidated that it may not be easily re-formed for the better or the worse. The present epoch, with all of you a great change, with many of you an entire change, of condition and surroundings, a time when you are first thrown upon your own unshared self-counsel and self-government, is an eminently favorable period for the building of which I am speaking. Of your past ways and habits you have had sufficient experience to know which of them should be retained and which abandoned ; and for the former you will be more free than ever to put

yourselves under congenial and helpful influences : as regards the latter you have equal freedom to avoid the associations which may hitherto have favored them.

It is, as it seems to me, among the peculiar advantages of an academic course, that its close makes such a break in the continuity of life that as to both mental and moral habitudes one may take an entirely fresh start, with new and more elastic vigor in every right direction, and with every possible encouragement to reverse a course that tends to evil. In my long experience I have known scores of instances in which this has proved itself the momentous epoch which it seems. I cannot recall a single instance, though there may have been such, in which a man who grad-

uated with pure character and manifestly high principles has immediately on leaving college plunged into vice, or become at once callous to moral obligation. But I can recall very many who have entered on their life-work with a diligence and earnestness of which their college career gave little promise, and I could furnish a list by no means short of those who have been arrested at this point on a moral declivity on which a few more downward steps would have been irrevocable ruin.

Let me then speak to you, with such authority as my years may give, of the building of character,—of the strength and the beauty that should be united in you, if it be your aim and purpose to be good and to do good.

II.

STRENGTH.

N speaking of strength as the foundation of character, I attach no small ethical importance to what is often slightly termed mere bodily strength, which I would have so utilized as to make the qualifying epithet "mere" an impertinence. When I was in college, gymnastic apparatus and training were first introduced, and their benefits were extended to all the members of college, under the tuition of our German professor, who was an enthusiast in this as in every part of his work. After a brief trial, I know not why, the whole system was abandoned,

and that for many years; but most of those who were its beneficiaries, I am very sure, retained through life, and those now surviving still retain, the vestiges of the vigor thus imparted and given. I rejoice in the athletic culture of the present day, and yet I wish that it were more equally diffused; for there is danger that it may in some cases be carried beyond the needs of a liberally educated man, and sometimes to a perilous extreme, while the excessive ardor of competition may tend to enlist in athletic sports comparatively few, and to make many who ought to engage in them idle and unprofited spectators.

I want that you should be strong in body, chief of all, because the soul depends upon the body for its instruments, and in

large part for its possibility of healthy action, and is circumscribed and enfeebled when these instruments are impaired. The prevalent euphemism by which we term certain vices weaknesses is contemptible as an excuse for one who is conscious of ability for the right and of the criminality of the wrong ; but it is very true in unnumbered instances as describing the actual genesis and growth of moral evil. The diseases that prey on the trees and plants in our orchards and gardens often owe their prevalence to the degeneracy and the poor staple of the species infected by them. Equally in the field of human society, corruption first attacks the feeblest plants. There are many who are wicked only because they are weak.

Many a youth becomes morally depraved simply because he has been a stranger to fresh air, cold water, and vigorous exercise. Bodily weakness is often the strength of appetite and passion. The very word *passion* tells its own story. It is passiveness, debility, the being acted upon without the power of repulsive reaction.

Then, too, it hardly needs to be said that for the more active, energetic, aggressive forms of virtue, physical strength is often an essential pre-requisite. The pioneers in human progress, reformers, patriots, working philanthropists, missionaries who have been successful propagandists, have almost always been stout, robust, hardy men, who could labor and endure to the utmost of human capacity.

Such men were Luther, Howard, Oberlin, Judson, Livingstone, — men who might have been victors in quasi-Olympic contests, had they not been champions in the nobler warfare with the powers of evil. To go back still farther, it could have been of no little avail in the planting of Christianity that its earliest apostles were made stern in self-denial, elastic under discouragement, brave in endurance and in peril, by their arduous toil and rough exposure as fishermen on the Sea of Galilee ; and that Paul, last called but foremost, supported himself and ministered to the necessities of others by manual labor as a tent-maker. Nor can I forget that the Founder of our religion, whose intense energy in the active service of humanity

is in Christian thought thrown too much into the background by the majestic sweetness of his spirit in suffering and in dying, and to whom, whether the prophet so meant it or not, the phrase, "travelling in the greatness of his strength," applies as to no other being that ever trod the earth, was himself a carpenter, and before his public ministry labored in the workshop of Joseph of Nazareth.

I would say to you, young men, who, I trust, have hard and good and faithful work before you in your several callings, Make yourselves as strong as God will let you be. Yet forget not that the strength of man, when exercised only for its own sake, has no more of dignity or of preciousness than that of the ox, horse, or dog,—that it

is worth a man's possessing only when it pours its vigor into the extensor muscles of the intellect, of the will, of the affections kind and devout, of the body that is spiritual, incorruptible and eternal.

Strength of mind is, no less than that of body, dependent to a very large degree on culture. We have the record, and your seniors in age have the knowledge, of not a few men of splendid genius, who have, sometimes because of vicious habits, sometimes because of mere indolence, never advanced beyond glorious promise; while among men who have shown an ability tantamount to genius there have been those with whom the converting of one talent into ten has been no hyperbole.

There are habits of our time that are

perilous, and often fatal, to the strength of mind. Among these I might name desultory and aimless reading, even of books not otherwise than good, when not required for needful recreation. Reading, on the gravest subjects, is often made to supersede thinking. There are minds that are rendered dyspeptic by overfeeding. They have lost the power of assimilation, and the materials derived from books lie round in undigested masses, clogging the mental passages, and precluding the possibility of vigorous action.

Equally is the habit of superficial study to be shunned. In every department of knowledge I attach great importance and value to text-books. They are the fitting basis for study; and without them one is

imperfectly qualified to go beyond them. But no science or part of a science is thoroughly studied, unless the mind has acted upon it in careful thought, so far as possible in independent research, and at least in attaining the various points of view accessible by the consultation of different authorities. Moreover, it is always to be remembered that the object of study is, or ought to be, not acquisition only, but the invigorating of the powers of mind by which alone acquisition can be utilized.

Strength of mind is in our own time constantly precluded or impaired by the fast life which we are tempted to lead, on the top of the tide of affairs, engrossed in whatever of novelty the passing moment may bring forth. There is such an

avalanche of current and transient interests as to distract the mind equally from the past and from the future. This is an influence which you will feel much more than now when you shall have entered upon professional or active life; yet even now, as not in the earlier time which I so vividly remember, the outside world is constantly invading our college halls, and in the crowded life which is often forced upon us there are frequent hindrances to the concentration of thought and the close and strenuous application by which alone the mind can grow. That our time is unfavorable to vigorous thinking may be seen in the genesis of opinions on practical subjects in the minds of most men of the world, who do not form their opinions, but

suffer them to be moulded by the attrition of their surroundings and associates, and do not determine their own modes of action, but go into the street or the public meeting with the cry, "Men and brethren, what shall I do?" Thus the conscience is no longer an internal, but a superficial organ, like the stomach in some of the lower orders of zoöphytes.

Weak minds, like weak bodies, are the cause of a very large amount of moral evil. A great part of the temptations to which we are exposed, especially in early life, come through human influence. The question of conduct is in every such case a question of strength between the tempter and the tempted. The latter may be rightly disposed and inclined ; yet this will

be of no avail if he have not reasoning power to unravel the tempter's sophistry, judicial faculties to analyze and weigh his opinions, self-determining force to resist his dictation, vigor and activity of mind to fence the intellectual life from being broken into and trodden down by a mind of greater energy, and a distinct and strong current of thought, sentiment and feeling, which can have its own flow, and can wind among other currents without mingling and blending with them. No matter how the mind is enfeebled, whether by indolence, or by superficial work, or by modes of life all whose details individually are innocent, and collectively are wrong only by defect, the result is the same,—an incapacity for moral resistance, an over-

susceptibility of influences from without, an inability for self-defence.

But while strength of body and strength of mind are of ethical value beyond estimate, they are of use, not as substitutes for moral principle, but as its allies and tributaries ; and I know of no moral principle worth contending for except that which is based on moral distinctions considered as necessary, intrinsic, inevitable, co-eternal with God himself, and which did God fail to recognize, He would no longer deserve the trust, reverence and worship of man. There can be no question of conduct that has not its infallibly right answer,—an absolutely right answer where there is perfect knowledge, which there is or may be in the overwhelming majority

of cases,—an answer relatively right as regards the degree of knowledge where the knowledge is partial. Almost every case in which volition is exercised contains the elements of its own solution. In almost every instance in which you have a moral decision to make, you know as well just what you ought to do as you know the circumstances which call for your decision. If the question were asked you as to another person's duty under such and such circumstances, you would answer with as confident assurance as that with which you would affirm the sun's rising or the river's flowing.

But independently of the direct personal influence of which I have spoken, there are two ways in which we all are strongly

tempted to diverge from what we know to be right. The first is compliance with the customs, habits, or judgment of those with whom we are most intimately associated, thus making the right a variable quantity, dependent, as it were, on latitude and longitude, and yet hardly so ; for these are reckoned from an unchanging equator and a fixed meridian. In saying this, I do not refer to customs that have no moral significance. In these, pliability and easy conformity are graceful, and betoken either gentle parentage, or high breeding, or both; and even St. Paul, with his inflexibility of principle, yet as true a gentleman as ever lived, rather boasts of his ability to become all things to all men. I speak now of the facility with which men often

lapse into the faults, and even the vices of the social medium in which they are for the time being,—abstinent here, self-indulgent to the extreme limit of temperance there ; in this circle, pure and reverent in speech, in that, giving the tongue broad license ; at home heedful of religious sanctities and observances, at a fashionable watering-place or in a distant or foreign city utterly regardless of them.

Now these compliances may not overstep the somewhat indefinite frontier between virtue and vice ; but they do show a capacity for vice in full development. One's social medium may change from the more to the less scrupulous portion of the community in which he dwells or sojourns. He may sink unconsciously by the law of

gravitation, which includes falling bodies in the moral as in the material universe ; or he may make conscious and willing choice of associations that impose the minimum of restraint. If not, he still lies open to temptation of any and every kind. His moral nature is a city without walls, inviting hostile incursions. He has no principle of his own, no reason for the right that he practices or complies with, or for abstaining from the wrong from which he holds himself aloof. Now a man does need to have in his own soul reasons for doing and for not doing, and ought to feel unspeakably ashamed of himself if he has not such reasons ; for if he has them not, his seeming virtue is in no sense his own. If he lived in a community of saints, and

conformed to all their ways, he would not be one whit the better for it, unless his outward virtue found pores through which it could be absorbed into his inward being. If he were in heaven, and said and did nothing unheavenly, it would be to him no heaven ; for place and mode of life are not character, and do not even shape character, unless there be an earnest desire to take in the sentiment and principle which they embody.

The other danger to which I now have special reference is in the cases in which there is a distinct recognition of the absolute right, but a willingness to make a slight, only a very slight departure from it. Last week I was at Nantucket, the greater part of which is a sand waste, with tracks

rather than roads branching out from the town like the sticks of a fan. Each of these tracks leads to its own somewhither; yet there are those that are so close together at starting, that one might think it a matter of indifference which of two he took in order to reach his destination, though their termini may be miles apart. The Hebrew Scriptures make great ethical use of the metaphor of a way, and with profound truth. There is but one right way, on which every right act is an onward and ascending step; and there is an instinctive tendency to move on in the way on which one has started,—a tendency that is intensified with every stage of progress. A very slight conscious deviation from the right is entering on a way.

which, seemingly diverging as by a mere hand's-breath, one who knows the right and thinks that he prefers it, is often willing to take, because it is almost right. He means but an act not to be repeated; he finds it a way which, once taken, he is not inclined to leave. He repeats his steps in the direction in which it leads; and while he thinks that he is still close by the right way, he has made so broad a deflection from it that he has not moral enterprise enough to return to it. I have often said and it cannot be too often or too earnestly repeated, There is no example which one is so prone to follow as his own; and therefore you cannot enter too fervently into the sentiment of the Hebrew Psalmist, "I hate the work of them who turn aside."

I wish that in our religious and ethical speech the same use were currently made of the term *righteousness*, that is, rightness, that is made in the Holy Scriptures. The creation of righteousness is the absorbing aim and purpose of Christianity. Worship, devout sentiment, emotional religion, unless they issue in righteousness, are worse than worthless, and especially so when they are in a certain sense sincere; for then they deceive both one's self and others. I have no skepticism about historical Christianity (so-called); I believe in the risen no less than in the dying Saviour; but the one reason above all others why I have no doubt that Jesus is God's ambassador to man is that I behold in him the everlasting righteous-

ness incarnate, and I see so plainly that to obey and follow him is to incarnate that same righteousness in our own hearts and lives.

This, my friends, is your great interest, transcending all others. You crave what is called success, and I heartily wish that it may be yours ; but what you want is the consciousness of success, and I do not think that you can have this, if there be within you anything short of upright principle, of an integrity which you would not part with for the world. I must say that in my large and long experience I have known no other real success, nor do I believe in any other. I have known, and the world has known, oh, how many ! and some of them illustrious instances of

what seemed pre-eminent success, on the part of men who, in order to obtain it, have made themselves less than pure, true and honest, who have sought it by muddy ways and tortuous mole-paths; and the result has always been disappointment and sickness of heart with what has been won, and an insatiable longing for more. No man has ever really succeeded in this world, to say nothing of the world to come, whose life-purpose, ever nearing its full realization, might not have found fit utterance in those words which the Hebrew poet put into the mouth of the man over whom had swept all the billows of adversity,—“Till I die I will not remove my integrity from me. My heart shall not reproach me so long as I live.” It is only he who can

say this that has the strength which belongs to God's living sanctuary.

I have spoken of ways. The way of righteousness, my friends, is your only true and happy way ; and if you ask how to find it, I know not where else to send you for guidance but to Him who alone could say with divine authority, "I am the way."

III.

BEAUTY.

“TRENGTH and beauty are in his sanctuary.”

The strength will not suffice for the perfection of character without the beauty. As the beautiful in nature is something more than the useful, so is the beautiful in character something more than the substantially good. There are some characters which we cannot help approving, yet cannot like. There are undeniably good people who yet make goodness unlovely. There is a certain grim sort of piety which, I have no doubt, is of value to the possessor, but can be of no

attractive power to anyone else. There is, on the other hand, a type of goodness which awakens as much admiration as respect, as much love as approval. There is a beauty of holiness, which cannot, indeed, exist without strength, which needs the robust frame of a righteousness fit to be everlasting, but which rounds out and fills in that frame with the fine and delicate tracery and the precious adorning, that attest the indwelling of the Spirit of God which is no less beauty-breathing than strength-giving.

Among the most important hints for the creation of beauty in the character and the outraying of it in the life is one derived from art, namely, that beauty has no sharp angles. Its lines seem continu-

ous, so gently does curve melt into curve. It is sharp angles that keep many souls from being beautiful that are almost so. Our good seems less good than it is, and often seems not at all good, because it is abrupt, rude, ill-timed, or ill-placed. *Brusquerie* in speech, and in manners a lack of that love-born skill which is the only kind of courtesy worth cultivating, often vitiate what is well-meant, worthy in purpose, and in its essence perfectly fitting, and deprive even the kindest ministries of their beatific power. Then, too, some of us have fits of goodness, which begin and end abruptly, and even though in the intervals the life be not bad, it is less good, it is on a lower plane, and mars the symmetry of the character. Then

again, some of us are betrayed by quick tempers into utterances and acts harshly at variance with our wonted habits of feeling. In all these ways such goodness as we have falls short of beauty. The truly beautiful life is even and uniform,—multitudinous indeed in its manifestations, yet pervaded by the same spirit, which breaks into various and many-toned harmony, as does the blast which sweeps through the pipes of the organ, when a skilled hand opens the valves.

But let it be said emphatically that the beauty of character cannot be put on. It is not veneering, but solid work. Its exterior must have an interior of the same material and finish. The soul of beauty alone can create the form of beauty.

Mere outside goodness never looks lovely.
You cannot so fit a mask to the face that
its seams and sutures shall not be seen.

The beauty of which I speak, it should be borne in mind, belongs to the whole of life, to things which we call little as well as to those that seem great. Nothing can be too small, or mean, or trivial to form a part of a beautiful life. Things are small and mean only when we render them so by the spirit which we put into them; and the least things are made great, and the least comely things beautiful, by the beauty of soul with which they are done, or endured, or enjoyed.

I spoke of Jesus Christ as a carpenter. I once saw a picture of Joseph's carpenter's shop, and Jesus, as a mere stripling, work-

ing at the bench. The only light in the picture was from the halo round his head, and that holy light bathed the rough beams and rafters in its glow, rested in mellow radiance on the chips and shavings on the floor, and made the rude interior look like a very fore-court heaven. The painter was right. If Jesus bore his part, as I have not the slightest doubt that he did, in the labor that supported his mother and sisters, then was there the same divine beauty in his handling the plane and the saw, as when his word gave sight to the blind or rolled back the shadow of death. So far as we put the spirit that we may breathe in from him into the humblest details of our work or our recreation, we make it truly, nay, in our measure, divinely beautiful.

This beauty of character you need, not only for your own sake, but equally for your social influence,—for the good that you may do in the world, which I trust will enter into the life-purpose of every one of you. It is this element of character more than anything else that gives goodness its beneficent power. You will do good, less by what you say or do, or even give, than by what you are. What you say or do for others, and in many instances what you give, is a small multiplicand, of which your own soul, the amount of spiritual beauty that there is in you, is by far the greater multiplier, and the product depends mainly on the multiplier.

Among those who go about doing good, it is not merely the full-handed, but much

more the full-hearted, whom the ear that hears them blesses, and to whom the eye that sees them bears witness. Such persons may have little to give, or may regard it as their true charity to give but little ; yet their genial presence, their tender sympathy, their gentleness and kindness, in unnumbered instances, restore the lost power of self-help, check wasteful vice, relieve else hopeless depression, and ward off dependence and pauperism ; while if they went with full purses, yet without the beauty of holiness and love, they would only deepen and perpetuate poverty and vice. The same principle applies to all modes of beneficence,—to all the offices of kindness which you can render. They derive their worth and efficacy from what

of the beauty of soul you can put into them.

A peculiarly good life is often spoken of, by the misuse of a scriptural phrase appropriate in its place and use, as a hidden life. In the common sense of the words, nothing could be less true. A good life is indeed hidden, inasmuch as it makes no show; where there is a show of goodness we may be sure that there is little else. But a truly good life cannot be really hidden. Through the thickest veil it shines, and makes the most opaque medium transparent. You can add no line, or touch, or tint of beauty to your own soul, that shall not enrich your social life, and thus enable you, by example and influence, by word and deed, to be of more

worth and service to the world around you.

My friends, the Beatitudes in the Sermon on the Mount are the soul's manual of beauty. Take them, I beg you, for the picture of what you ought to be, for the ideal of your constant aspiration, for the directory of your daily life; and feel that the utmost grace, sweetness, loveliness that you can attain in this world, the surest pledge of a growing fitness for the higher life all radiant with the beauty of holiness, is the consciousness that you have an increasing property in these benedictions.

“Strength and beauty are in his sanctuary.” Let me ask you to consider for a

moment how they are not only blended, but unified in him whose earthly life was the shrine of God's perpetual indwelling. I have spoken of his strength and of his beauty. Can you separate them? Can you think of them apart? Can you imagine that the record of his might would have traversed the ages, had not that might been at the same time transcendent beauty? Suppose that there were in his life-story mere deeds of marvellous power, where we read of his tender sympathy, of his tears with those who wept, of his gentle, kindly intercourse with the grief-stricken and the sin-stricken, of his taking little children in his arms so lovingly, think you that he would have made his way as he has along these centuries, conquering and still to conquer?

Yet more — it would demand an hour, a day, a volume, to say as it ought to be said what I must say in a moment — is it not through the beauty of his holiness, more, far more, than by his omnipotence, that God takes possession of our hearts and subdues our wills to his? To the Supreme, Almighty Ruler of the universe we might in fear render cold and distant homage and slavish obedience. But we become the willing servants of the Father God, whose joy-giving Spirit wraps our whole lives in his own robe of peerless beauty, who makes all the powers of nature tributary to the benignity of his loving kindness, who by everything beautiful in its time and for its use claims a reverence which is but love intensified, a

love which is but reverence made sweet and tender.

My friends, I have thus brought these elements of strength and beauty together, because I so feel your need of them both and equally in the life that lies before you. You need them both, even in your speculative philosophy. Research and reasoning are not the sole avenues to truth. The æsthetic faculties are also cognitive powers. Their intuition is oftener infallible than reasoning, because based on surer premises. They bring us, through the beauty which shapes itself in our souls, into harmony with all that is fair and lovely in the universe, and thus give us a profounder knowledge of the infinite Creator than the unemotional processes of

intellect can reach. There is, too, in the entire realm of spiritual being a wealth of beauty into which a cognate spirit alone can enter. Indeed, there is an instinct of the moral nature which precedes and transcends reason, and apprehends by its own affinity truths beyond the scope of an unspiritual philosophy, but revealed to the soul suffused with the beauty of holiness.

This same union of the stronger and gentler elements of character should subsist in your active life-work, in which I crave for you the will and the opportunity for earnest and energetic industry and aggressive mental enterprise ; but for this you will only find a greater need of traits of spirit that shall temper the hardness and dryness of a busy career with humane

sympathies, and affections both Godward and manward. There is no life that is not arid and dreary if the soul of beauty have no place in it. Seek then with the strength of your youth the beauty which shall make it even immeasurably stronger. On your lifeway, plant, wherever you can, instead of the thorn the fir tree, instead of the brier the myrtle. Show by your faithful culture that flowers, the very flowers of heaven, can bloom along the busiest paths that it may be yours to tread.

May your career through this earthly life be so energized by strength consecrated to the service of God and man, and so irradiated by the beauty of a pure, meek, and gentle spirit, that it shall be pursued with no change but progress

in the life beyond death. May God Almighty bless you. May your minds and hearts be kept in his knowledge and love, and your steps in the way of his commandments.

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